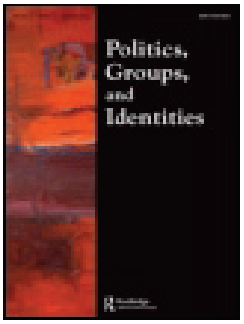

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Trumped up challenges: limitations, opportunities, and the future of political research on Muslim Americans

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ABSTRACT

With the election of Donald J. Trump as president, Muslim Americans may face the most pronounced threat to their collective political well-being in history. Unfortunately, while scholars have generated insights into the dynamics that affect members of this very diverse community in U.S. politics, assessment of Muslim Americans lags other religious and ethnic groups in terms of data and hypothesis testing. In this essay, we review the basic political challenges facing Muslim Americans at the dawn of the Trump era, and chronicle some of the key studies on Muslims that should animate future efforts in assessing this community. We then examine some of the limitations of existing work on the subject, and look ahead to plans for innovation in scholarship on Muslim Americans in the coming years.

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Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and increasingly since the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, media and public attention to Muslim Americans has increased, as has the salience of a Muslim American political identity. Scholarly attention to this identity-based phenomenon, however, has lagged (in part) because of the methodological challenges inherent in studying a stigmatized community considered suspicious by sizeable percentages of non-Muslims. We recently brought together faculty and graduate students from across the country for a workshop to discuss the state of political science scholarship on Muslim American political attitudes and behavior, and how we might work together to generate new directions in research on Muslim Americans.

In this essay, we review recent U.S. political developments related to Muslim Americans, including those pertaining to the Trump administration, and how to foster increased scholarly attention to this increasingly relevant identity group. We also assess the state of the political science and related literature on Muslim Americans from both pre and post 9/11 perspectives. We then focus on some of the goals identified as part of the workshop on Muslim politics research, which we suggest point ways forward in assessing how Muslims negotiate the realities of American life in the Trump era.

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Being Muslim in the Trump era

Few political observers thought that Trump would win the 2016 presidential election. The anticipated victory by Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton likely gave some comfort to Muslim Americans who had been subject to a parade of vitriolic comments from Trump, his campaign surrogates, and the wider field of Republican presidential candidates since 2015. The actions of Trump's early days in the White House, including the January 27, 2017 ban on entry into the U.S. from select Muslim-majority countries, indicate that the president intends to follow through on his campaign rhetoric (even as the federal courts continue to stay the president's orders). This is why it is not hyperbole to suggest that Trump's election represents the strongest threat to Muslim welfare – and challenge to the health of Muslim identity – in the U.S. since the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In some ways, the threat the Trump administration poses might be considered worse than the scrutiny directed at Muslims in 9/11's wake given that then-president George W. Bush made several positive statements about Muslims and Islam.

In contrast, Trump's words and actions are consistently hostile to Muslims and Muslim Americans (even as the administration does its best to frame executive actions as focused on "extremists," members of ISIS, and citizens of foreign states who might perpetrate attacks on U.S. soil). Though Trump has not made blanket statements such as "all Muslims are bad," or words to that effect, his administration's attempts to impose multiple travel bans throughout 2017, coupled with the decided lack of affirmatory statements about Muslims and Islam (which were offered often by his two immediate predecessors), make Trump's rhetoric and executive actions unprecedented for an American president in targeting a minority group for scrutiny.

Trump was not alone in offering anti-Muslim rhetoric during the presidential campaign; various Republican presidential candidates in 2015 and 2016 issued similar statements. For example, surgeon-turned-candidate (and now Trump's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development) Ben Carson commented that Muslims should be prohibited from holding the presidency because Islam is incompatible with the U.S. Constitution (this, despite the "no religious test" clause in Article V). Texas Senator Ted Cruz called for the wholesale policing of Muslim neighborhoods. At the time, sizeable proportions of the U.S. population greeted these statements with support. Interestingly, some presidential contenders in 2015 and even then-Indiana governor (now current Vice President) Mike Pence denounced Trump's proposed ban on Muslims as un-American and unconstitutional. Yet there have been no signs of disunity thus far from within Trump's administration in terms of policy or prose regarding Muslims and Islam.

But it is not just Republicans who contribute to negative impressions of Muslims and Islam: Democrats and other thought leaders have also had a hand in this process. The result is that Muslims have encountered identity boundary making on a large and bipartisan scale, the intent of which has been to accentuate a national identity that preferences racial, ethnic, political, and religious identities that are decidedly non-Muslim. This boundary formation casts Muslims in the position of a subaltern group whose role in the social and political structure is that of outsiders, and perhaps dangerous ones at that (Reif 1995; Kahn 1998). While Muslims have some agency in creating social representations and shared identities according to sincerely held preferences (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2004), Muslim efficacy in this process is limited in the U.S. context.

Indeed, in the aftermath of their collective treatment since the 9/11 attacks, U.S. Muslims are among the most delegitimized groups from both a political and social standpoint (Reicher 2004).

This, in part, helps to explain why anti-Muslim rhetoric remains red meat for a certain (and by no means small) segment of the American electorate despite the work of organizations like the Muslim Public Affairs Council and Council on American Islamic Relations, countless public service announcements about Muslim patriotism, and Muslims' striking demographic resemblance to the non-Muslim American middle class. The barbaric and well-publicized actions of ISIS militants in Syria and Iraq, isolated events such as the 2010 Fort Hood shooting, and the continued (and erroneous) perception articulated by some critics charging that Muslim groups have not gone on record often enough to denounce brutality waged in the name of their faith, have also helped to continually undermine how Muslims are perceived by non-Muslims.

The increasing association of Muslims with terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and emphasized during the 2016 presidential campaign, served to crystallize for many Muslims a newly salient identity as part of the Muslim American community and their role in U.S. politics. Therefore, Muslim American identity – however it is conceived and lived out by individuals – is potentially quite important in affecting what Muslims report believing and doing in the political realm on surveys and in interviews and focus groups. It is more crucial than ever that political scientists increase their understanding of Muslim identity, attitudes, and political behavior.

The Muslim politics literature landscape, before 9/11

The literature on Muslim Americans can be generally divided into two segments: before the attacks of September 11, 2001, and afterward. Unfortunately, while there have been various circumstances since 9/11 that affect Muslim Americans (and their political standing), the political science scholarship has been slow to respond in assessing the impact on Muslim life in the U.S. (e.g., the 9/11 mosque in New York, the Fort Hood shooting, Iraq war, ISIS, anti-Muslim hate crimes and political rhetoric, etc.). This is not to say that Muslim life in America has been overlooked, but there is little in the way of studies that directly assess impacts of controversies affecting Muslims in any consistent manner.

Since Muslims living in North American can be traced at least as far back as the sixteenth century (see Austin 1984), it is unsurprising that dozens of scholarly assessments of Muslims – including political realities confronting this group – existed long before the increased attention to Muslims as a political group in the wake of 9/11. The pre-9/11 literature addressed three overarching questions: (1) the nature of Muslim identity as a religious experience in America; (2) how non-Muslims perceive Islam and Muslims, and (3) the points of diversity among Muslim Americans (and how Muslim subgroups relate to each other, if at all).

Well-received volumes from Haddad and Smith (1993) and Smith (1999) have done much to shape the literature on Muslim political experiences in America. In some ways both Haddad and Smith presaged the dominant scholarly focus on topics regarding Islamic political thought, the role of Muslims in their local communities, the experiences of Muslims in different racial and gender subgroups (including and especially African American Muslims), Muslim perception of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and

the perceptions that non-Muslims have of Muslim Americans. For its part, Smith's work provided a particular focus on the struggles Muslim women face in living out their identities in a culture that emphasizes materialism and individualism (presumably to a greater extent than what Islam generally promotes). Other pre-2001 scholarship provided in-depth studies of Muslim history, the group's racial and ethnic diversity, immigration trends, the effects of slavery and civil rights struggles, and attempts at assimilation (see Austin 1984; Naff 1985; Haddad and Lummis 1987; Wormser 1994; McCloud 1995; Haddad and Esposito 1998; Kahn 1998; Suleiman 1999). Esposito's (1999) research arguably did the most of any pre-9/11 scholarship to take on Islamic and Muslim stereotypes stemming from Huntington's (1993) clash of civilizations argument by correctly characterizing Islam as a religion interpreted and lived in diverse ways.

Overall, this older line of scholarship documents that many of the challenges faced by Muslims today, including government scrutiny and outgroup-based discrimination, were present prior to the 9/11 attacks (though to much lesser extent). A drawback of these works, however, is that they are primarily qualitative, which makes research replication more difficult. Some of the literature of this period, moreover, focused on *Arab* – not Muslim – American mobility and discrimination. Naber (2000), Faragallah, Schumm, and Webb (1997), Suleiman (1999), Wingfield and Karaman (1995), Seikaly (2001), and Wing (2000) are just a few examples of well-received scholarly articles that engaged Arab American identity, invisibility, discrimination, and inequality. Future political science scholarship on Muslim Americans stands on the shoulders of these seminal pre-9/11 studies.

And after 9/11

Muslim scholarship after the 9/11 attacks continued with themes articulated in the pre-9/11 scholarship, and were joined by a more robust focus on discrimination against Muslims, Muslim political attachments and activity, and the dynamics of Muslim identity – all from the vantage point of quantitative data. The initial research focus was on the pronounced spike in reported hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs in late 2001 and early 2002 (Human Rights Watch 2002). It did not take long for political commentators at the time to introduce conflictual narratives about the nation's "new normal" patterned on Huntington's writings about the need for democratic societies to be wary of Islamic teachings (and the Muslims who follow them) (see Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). Dana, Barreto, and Oskooii (2011), Powell (2011), and Lajevardi (2016) documented how the post-9/11 framing of Islam contributed to lingering anti-Muslim sentiment in media coverage. The cultural aspect of religious identity is the kind of "easy" issue that resonates with large swaths of the public (see Carmines and Stimson 1980), and scholars documented that much of the non-Muslim public was conditioned to hold negative and scrutinizing views of Muslim Americans (Panagopoulos 2006; Penning 2009).

Ideally, scholars would have produced studies on Muslim life in America in reaction to several of the afore-mentioned events that we suspect negatively impacted Muslim Americans after 9/11 and before the 2016 election cycle. Instead, the published political science research on Muslim Americans tended to focus on questions of identity and political participation writ large and used 9/11 as the major (and in some cases, only) watershed event of relevance. This is understandable given that 9/11 produced clearly defined government

policies to reference in their assessments of Muslim American life, but it might recommend that scholars look to achieve greater responsiveness to current events in future research efforts. The post-9/11 identity focus is also logical, as the increasing association of Muslims with terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and emphasized during the 2016 presidential campaign, served to crystallize for many Muslims a newly salient identity as part of the Muslim American community and their role in U.S. politics.

The post 9/11 identity focus enabled scholars to make notable progress toward understanding both the social and psychological aspects of Muslim life in American society and politics, although much of the scholarship picks up on questions and themes first introduced in the pre-9/11 literature. For example, Ayers (2007), Ayers and Hofstetter (2008), and Jalazai (2011) utilized a hybrid of social psychological explanations for Muslim political behavior and engagement. Drawing on Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), elements of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and aspects of the personal religion indicators often used in the study of American Christianity (e.g., Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Djupe and Gilbert 2006), Ayers, Hofstetter, and Jalazai assess how reported anxiety levels as measured in a 2004 national Zogby poll of U.S. Muslims affect reported political participation across a variety of ethnic subgroups within the Muslim population. They report a robust and positive relationship between reported anxiety and Muslim political engagement, with racial and ethnic subgroup controls (African Americans excepted) showing little impact on the outcome variables. Overall, religion's role in determining engagement appears mixed, with available religious resources increasing engagement and beliefs decreasing it. O'Connor and Jahan (2014) took the question of Muslim psychological impacts to the next logical step of assessing Muslim response to government surveillance. Oskooii's (2016) focus on the discrimination Muslims encounter is similar in topic. Meanwhile, Suhay, Calfano, and Dawe (2016) examined how group-based cues on patriotic behavior attributed randomly to Muslims and non-Muslims impact Muslim agreement with a battery of patriotic attitudes and behaviors.

Taking a cue from Jamal's (2005) landmark study, some scholars turned their attention to Muslim politics as meted through activity in mosques or Islamic centers. The best known of these projects is the Muslim American Public Opinion Survey (Barreto et al. 2007; Dana, Wilcox-Archuelta, and Barreto 2017). Rather than attempting to generate a representative sample of U.S. Muslims – a challenge given the lack of religious data in the U.S. Census – Barreto et al. used a form of probability and cluster sampling that focused on sample generation from high-density Muslim population areas across the U.S. The researchers surveyed mosque attendees in six metropolitan areas – Seattle, Dearborn, Michigan, San Diego, Irvine, Riverside, and Raleigh-Durham. A similar effort is the 2006 Mosque Survey of Muslims in the U.S. (Choi, Gamal, and Patterson 2011). A smaller such effort was conducted in 2013 (Lajevardi, Yacobian, and Michelson 2014). These mosque-based studies provide numerous insights into Muslim partisanship, voting behavior, opinion, and political activity. They also reflect Jamal's (2005) oft-cited link between mosque involvement, group identity, and political activity.

In response to the growing interest in Muslim Americans, Pew (2007, 2011, 2017) and Gallup (2009, 2011) released omnibus surveys of the U.S. Muslim population, but the observational data collected in those surveys are not suited for testing direct causal hypotheses. The same is true for the various studies conducted on behalf of the Council

on American-Islamic Relations (2006, 2008; see also Bagby, Perl, and Froehle 2001). Meanwhile, Bukhari and Nyang (2004) undertook the Muslim in the American Public Square survey project, which Calfano, Djupe, and Green (2008) used to assess Muslim American political issue positions and partisanship patterns; but, again, these efforts involved observational data. Calfano's (forthcoming) volume is an amalgam of qualitative, observational survey, and experimental data that straddles the themes and approaches of both pre and post 9/11 scholarship, including a focus on the complexity of Muslim identity and an assessment of how identity group norms impact Muslim political behavior. As such, the state of Muslim Americans research is one of exploring questions of interest with some preliminary findings generated across a series of topics. The task now is to build on these useful insights.

Moving Muslim American research forward

The issue is not so much with the general questions asked in the post 9/11 literature, but, instead, with the methodological nature of most existing studies (and the use of observational survey data with Muslim population samples of varying quality) (see Berry, Chouhoud, and Junn 2016 for a review of sampling methods for Muslim studies). Given the limitations of existing data and the desire to advance the state of the literature – and with financial support from the National Science Foundation – we hosted the December 2016 Menlo College workshop. As a first step in planning and conducting a large-*N*, in-depth, multilingual survey of the Muslim community, we brought interested faculty and graduate students together for a full-day workshop where we discussed the extant literature, identified lingering questions and hypotheses, and planned how to ensure that data collection is conducted so as to maximize usefulness and minimize overlap of effort by various scholars.

Workshop participants identified three core themes ripe to explore in the ongoing study of American Muslims: (1) identity, (2) behavior, and (3) policy preferences. These are similar to the larger themes in the extant Muslim scholarship both pre and post 9/11, but there was perhaps more workshop emphasis on Muslim policy preferences, indicating that future work examining Muslim American representation is central to the study of this marginalized group. There are several additional hypotheses about Muslim American identity that are steeped in aspects of both the pre and post 9/11 scholarship, including but not limited to: (1) the racialized and panethnic formation of identity in the years after the 9/11 attacks, (2) the difference between religious identity and religiosity, (3) the factors that strengthen Muslim American identity, (4) testing respondents' knowledge of Islam, (5) covert versus overt identity, and 6) how negative and positive discrimination affect identity.

Increased scrutiny since 9/11 has contributed to the emergence of a Muslim American political identity, with follow-on behavior. Polls indicate that for Muslim voters, their religion is important to their voting decisions (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010). American foreign policy in the Middle East and U.S. relations with Muslim countries have been influential in solidifying Muslim American identity (Haddad 2011). This, in part, is why workshop participants identified the third (policy preference) domain as a core theme. Trump has already attempted to implement a ban on entry to the U.S. from many majority-Muslim countries, and other policies discussed during his presidential campaign may yet find their way into an executive order or new legislation, such as

increased surveillance of U.S. mosques, the policing of low-income Muslim neighborhoods, or a Muslim registry. Researchers hope to explore hypotheses about Muslim American attitudes towards these policies that affect their communities, as well as how Muslim American identity is related to other political attitudes. These include policies relevant to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, economic policy, environmental policy, immigration policy, the secularization of religion in the U.S., interventionist foreign policy stances, and the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Getting at these themes requires new data collection efforts, the specifics of which occupied large segments of workshop conversation. While discussing the available samples and previous measures of Muslim American political behavior, workshop participants expressed some degree of frustration. For example, many surveys show that Muslim Americans report participating in politics at the same rate as non-Muslims. Participants held strong reservations about this finding and question whether social desirability bias may be responsible for driving high reporting rates. Workshop attendees offered numerous alternative suggestions for measuring civic participation by Muslim Americans, including attending meetings addressing Muslim-specific issues, collective versus individual political participation, and searching for examples of political elites who visit mosques in an effort to recruit the community. These sampling adjustments may also be useful to employ following the onset of whatever the next controversy surrounding Muslims and Islam might be (as a way to gain leverage on desirability bias effects).

Workshop consensus was that scholars must devise novel methodological and sampling techniques. The good news is that the Pew and Gallup studies provide templates for researchers in generating something close to a representative sample; the bad news is that developing these representative studies is costly. When contracting out to survey firms, scholars are faced with three problems. First, survey firms on average report having between 200 and 600 Muslims as part of their panels; not nearly enough individuals to constitute a representative sample for scholars to survey. Second, confidently identifying Muslim respondents in these firms' samples is nearly impossible. To increase sample sizes and the probability that respondents are in fact *Muslim*, scholars instead have chosen to conduct venue-based sampling and snowball sampling methods. Third, Muslims, especially after the 2016 presidential elections, are fearful that polling calls are disguised surveillance practices, which not only increase anxiety but also depress response rates and compliance.

For example, a survey by Emerge USA (a non-profit organization seeking to empower Muslim Americans) after the November 2016 election gave rise to tacit fears that Muslims were being targeted for surveillance as part of then President-elect Donald Trump's campaign promise of registering all Muslims in the country in a database when they were asked to dial one if they were Muslim and two if they were not.[1] Some subjects believed that "Emerge USA" was not in fact a Muslim advocacy group, but, rather, an anti-Islam group using the organization's name in disguise. When conducting their face-to-face surveys at an Islamic Community Center in 2013, Lajevardi, Yacobian, and Michelson (2014) found respondents hesitant to answer questions about their political attitudes and behavior, despite assurances from the Imam and the research team that the work was for an academic study. All of this suggests that scholars investigating Muslim Americans should be wary of inadvertently inducing fear, social desirability bias, or anxiety by partnering with organizations and by avoiding surveying in such a way that might frighten the population into censorship and segregation.

In addition, existing surveys tend to lag in their inclusion of African American Muslim respondents, compared to White, Asian, and Middle Eastern Muslims. The Pew Research Center places the proportion of Black Muslims at 28 percent.[2] Given the importance of intersecting religious and racial identities – and the reality that the only Muslim American descriptive representation today lies with two Black Muslim members of Congress – working to improve the inclusion of African Americans in Muslim survey samples should be a priority for researchers. Doing so will require building greater trust between members of the Muslim community and researchers, something that until now has been challenging given rational fears of surveillance by Muslim Americans generally and by African American Muslims in particular. Heightened anxiety stemming from the rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration may make this reluctance to participate in research an even greater challenge for scholars moving forward.

Finally, we note that the Muslim American workshop is an example that scholars of other minority and racialized communities can emulate. Race and ethnic politics scholars examining Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans face similar challenges as those investigating Muslim Americans, as do scholars focused on the LGBT community, the disability community, and other small or marginalized groups. Small sample sizes, social desirability bias driving high reporting rates of political participation, and high respondent attrition rates raise similar opportunities to devise novel methodological and sampling techniques. Increased discussion, collaboration, and coordination across research groups can likely yield more fruitful opportunities for these scholars. These surveying challenges can be mitigated by exploring methods of increasing the representativeness of surveyed individuals and varying the question wording (using randomized survey experiment methods) within samples. Additional strategies will be explored by the group as the survey instrument is developed, including deploying research teams to administer surveys in cities with known Muslim communities as a way to augment the probability-proportional-to-size and list-based sampling approaches used in existing Muslim surveys.

Clearly, there are as many challenges as opportunities in researching Muslim Americans, and we look forward to working with the colleagues who attended the Muslim Americans Workshop (and those who did not) to continue to gather and share knowledge about Muslim American identity, attitudes, and behaviors. These efforts will enhance scholarship on a marginalized and understudied group that is sure to be of political relevance throughout the Trump administration and for years to come.

Notes

1. Polling calls to U.S. Muslims raise surveillance fears. November 23, 2016. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-muslims-idUSKBN13I2PK.
2. The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups. Pew Research Center, July 27, 2015. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/?utm_content=buffer9b4dc&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

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